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ABSTRACT

Taking advantage of legislation permitting modified school calendars, the four-day work week has been implemented by 23 small, rural Colorado school districts representing 5,200 children. Thirteen districts implemented the four-day program in the 1980-81 school year. Ten additional districts applied as first year pilot programs in the 1981-82 school year. A study conducted by Colorado State University of the original 13 school districts found that all districts demonstrated the potential of the schedule to save energy and transportation costs, and to reduce student and teacher absenteeism. In addition, student achievement levels were comparable to their achievement prior to experiencing the four-day week. Parents, teachers, and students favored the four-day concept over a five-day week by a wide margin. The school districts found they achieved notable cost savings in many areas and there were important strategic considerations surrounding the decision of taking Monday or Friday off. In addition to information from the study, other observation and study have led to conclusions that: negative factors must also be carefully examined (some students will have excess time around town, the school day is very long for young children, etc.), and a community and school should avoid moving into a four-day schedule without careful study and planning. (BRR)

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COLORADO'S ALTERNATIVE SCHOOL CALENDAR PROGRAM AND THE FOUR DAY WEEK

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Educators are noted for labeling and classifying certain terminology into categories which may cause misunderstanding. The four-day week implemented by twenty-three Colorado school districts is a good example of this. Actually the four-day week is but one approach to designing and implementing an alternative school calendar. Double sessions, year-round educational programs and flexible schedules are nothing more than variations of alternative school calendar programs.

The idea of alternative calendars is not new nor necessarily innovative. In 1975, Educational Research Inc., published a report about several school districts in various sections of the United States which had worked with the four-day week concept. Cimarron, New Mexico schools are in their 10th year of a successful four-day week program. Cherry Creek, Colorado Springs and Jefferson County school districts in Colorado have successfully operated year-round educational programs for several years.

In an attempt to conserve energy, the Colorado 1980 General Assembly enacted Senate Bill #78 providing local school boards the authority to modify their school calendars. This permissive legislation permits a local school district, upon application to, and approval by the State Board of Education, to hold less than the 180 day schedule

required by law provided the classroom instructional hours of 180 day schedule is maintained.

Minimum data required under the legislation are:

1. Impact on students' achievement (suggest pre and post testing comparisons)
2. Transportation and facility utilization changes
3. Cost comparisons over previous year's expenditures
4. Staff, parent and student reactions
5. Supportive evidence that pupils' educational opportunities and services are comparable to the 180 day schedule.

Present state rules for traditional school calendars require six hours of daily instructional hours, exclusive of lunch, for secondary schools and 5 1/2 hours instructional time, exclusive of lunch, for elementary schools.

Thirteen Colorado school districts submitted applications for State Board approval to implement four-day programs for the 1980-81 school year. All thirteen school districts were approved to pilot the program. These districts utilized an extended day with pupils attending school four days each week for approximately 7 1/2 hours instructional time. In each district Monday or Friday was the off day and beginning and dismissal times varied with each individual district. Twelve of the thirteen districts resubmitted applications to continue the program a second year (1981-82). One district did not reapply for reasons totally unrelated to the four-day week experience.

Ten additional districts applied as first year pilot programs to implement the four-day week in the 1981-82 school year. One of these districts, although approved by the State Board of Education, elected to continue the traditional school year. Colorado now has 23 school districts representing 5,200 children on the four-day week schedule. In addition to the above, one district experiencing rapid growth has been approved for a year-round educational program.

The Department of Education contracted with the Office for Rural Education at Colorado State University to conduct a comprehensive evaluation of the original 13 school districts which piloted the program during 1980-81. This study is now completed and copies of the 78 page report may be obtained by writing the Office for Rural Education at Colorado State University, 300 Education Building, Fort Collins, Colorado 80523. The cost for the publication is $10.95.

Dr. Robert Richburg, from the Office for Rural Education, served as the Evaluation Project Coordinator. Dr. Richburg feels it is premature to determine the success of the four-day week program or to draw any definite conclusions. However, the major findings of his research are summarized as follows:

1. The concept of extending the school day for four days in lieu of holding classes a fifth day is an innovative alternative to the conventional five-day school week. Though the twelve districts involved in this study implemented the four-day schedule with many variations and with differing objectives, all districts demonstrated the potential of the schedule to save energy and transportation costs, and to reduce student and teacher absenteeism.

2. Achievement levels for students on the four-day week are comparable to the same students' achievement prior to experiencing the four-day week.

3. Parents, teachers and students all favor the four-day week concept over the five-day week by a wide margin. Ninety-one percent of the 767 parents surveyed supported the four-day week. Likewise, 94.7% of the 205 teachers and 93.2% of the 1,474 students surveyed indicated a preference for the alternative schedule. This broad support suggests that the four-day schedule offers more than an opportunity to cut budget costs. Many of those surveyed prefer the alternative schedule because of the personal and professional opportunities presented by the three-day weekend, and also because of its instructional advantages. Secondary teachers believe the longer class periods provide greater instructional flexibility and efficiency. Elementary teachers also favor the four-day schedule by a wide margin. They often comment that the days are long for young children, but they also cite many instructional advantages which can be achieved with careful and creative planning.

4. There are important strategic considerations surrounding the decision whether to take Monday or Friday off on the four-day schedule. Taking Monday off will improve energy savings. Taking Friday off reduces energy savings compared to Monday, but enables a district to schedule out of class activities to avoid interference with academic time. By using Fridays for sporting events and other out of class activities, one district calculated savings in academic time which approached one week per student in its high school.

5. The school districts in this study achieved notable cost savings in many areas. Gasoline consumption for buses and other school vehicles was reduced by 22.5%. Bus maintenance costs were reduced by 18%. Electrical consumption was reduced by 23%. After adjustments were made for the unusually warm 1980-81 winter in Colorado, these districts showed savings in heating fuel consumption ranging from 7% to 25%. Savings were also realized in substitute teachers' costs, as these districts utilized an average of 24.5 few substitute days under the four-day schedule.

Local school districts may design their own individualized formats for the collection of information but the minimum data must be supplied in a formal report to the Commissioner of Education no later than thirty days following the end of the school year.

The possibilities the four-day week phase of the alternative school calendar may offer for educational innovations are limited only by the imagination and creativity of a local community and its school system.

Examples of such possibilities, other than energy conservation, are:

1. The enhancement of work/study programs
2. The advancement of professional and staff development programs
3. The improvement of curriculum planning
4. Better evaluation of student achievement
5. A provision for increased time in vocational education, career opportunities, and on the job training on the nonschool day.

The four-day week concept may not be appropriate for all school districts, but for many districts it can provide a schedule accommodating many new community and student opportunities.

After two years of observing and studying the operations and reports of the school districts involved with a four-day week alternative calendar the writers have concluded:

1. The longer teacher/student daily contact time is positively related to improved student achievement, student and teacher absenteeism is reduced, and

additional time is provided for family activities, work, leisure time, personal business and participation in other community organizations. The opportunity for a school system to improve its curriculum through flexible scheduling techniques is present.

2. The evaluation information supports the conclusion that a four-day week schedule does in fact reduce energy consumption and general operations costs.

3. Negative factors must also be carefully examined. Some of the school district's energy costs are diverted to the family's expense. There are some pupils who will have excess free time to spend around town. The school day is longer for young children and some will arrive home later in the afternoon. Working fathers and mothers may be faced with additional costs and unstructured time for their children.

4. A community and school district should avoid moving into a four-day week schedule without first conducting careful studies and planning. Upon completion of a pre-planning study the advantages should be weighed against the disadvantages. A decision should be made only after careful study.

5. The four-day week piloting program in Colorado has been limited to small rural school districts. There is no data indicating implications the schedule may have for urban or suburban school districts.

6. Only time, continued comprehensive evaluation and a monitoring of the community attitudes will determine if the four-day week schedule affords a better alternative than the traditional five-day week.